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West Virginia's Other Crisis

A week ago, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin ended the "state of emergency," an official term that helps to define what kind of help is available to the public. However, the effects of Freedom Industries spilling thousands of gallons of a coal-washing chemical into the drinking water will be felt in this region for a long time.

Indeed, the state's handling of this chemical spill has precipitated a whole other crisis, one the governor may not fully appreciate.

Debbie Downs, of South Charleston, summed the matter up perfectly in the Sunday Gazette-Mail:

"This is all about trust," she told Gazette reporter Travis Crum while waiting to refill water jugs, a day after the governor's announcement and many weeks after West Virginia American Water Company assured everyone they should drink the water.

But the governor, his public health staff and West Virginia American Water had long since lost the public's trust, and they could not have done it more thoroughly if they had drawn up a plan first. In the early hours, first they weren't sure what chemical was in the water. Then they couldn't say what the effects are on human health, or what is considered a safe level.

Still, people deal with uncertainty. "I don't know" is sometimes the only honest answer, and the public expected the professionals to figure it out and advise.

But when the flushing instructions came, they did not take into account large structures or people with septic tanks. Water company and state health officials encouraged people to use the water right away, only to learn that breathing the vapor and washing in it sent some people to hospitals and caused less severe symptoms in who knows how many others. And when people reported these concerns, for their pains they received a lot of doubletalk and insults.

State and federal public health and water company officials all mouthed the words "abundance of caution," but their actions belied their words. What they really showed was an abundance of wishful thinking.

Everyone wants things to get back to normal, they seemed to think, so the sooner we say all is well, the sooner everything will be back to normal.

But people aren't stupid. They know their water didn't smell like licorice before the spill, and out of a true abundance of caution, chose in large numbers not to drink or cook with it until they had some reason to have more confidence. The more Gov. Tomblin's public health director Letitia Tierney belittled people's concerns, the more West Virginia American Water President Jeff McIntyre ignored worries that the chemical lingered in residential pipes and appliances, the more they put their assurances ahead of their data, the more trust they lost.

For the longest time, state health officials seemed to have no interest in testing homes to verify what they were assuring people - that all was well. Gov. Tomblin only reluctantly agreed to home testing. His public health people still don't seem to know if they want to study possible health effects long-term. Last week, Ann Goldberg, director of public-health regulations for the state Bureau of Public Health, told lawmakers there are

no plans for long-term study, the Gazette's David Gutman reported. Perhaps sensing that was the wrong answer, DHHR spokeswoman Allison Adler clarified in a follow-up email that they are reviewing a plan and they'll need money. This week, Delegate Meshea Poore, D-Kanawha, observed that Tierney has been inconsistent in her messages to lawmakers on the need for more study. That's putting it mildly.

Of course, everyone has wanted the crisis to be over, to get back to normal. But - more wisely than their "leaders" - state residents don't pretend all is well when it isn't, or when they lack the data to make a determination. What no voter, taxpayer, ratepayer, householder, business owner or anyone else wanted was premature reassurance.

And that brings us to the other crisis. Sunday marks the two-month anniversary of the chemical spill. The next time there is a public health emergency - and there is always a next time - thousands of West Virginians will not trust their public health officials, even the diligent ones. Well-being and possibly lives may be at stake, and the professional, expert advice that the public needs and pays for will all be suspect. Their cautions, their recommendations, their prohibitions, all carry less trust than they did two months ago. This is a dangerous state of affairs.

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